The Returns of the Past

Nadine Attewell

That Liverpool, as the cultural theorist Ian Baucom argues, must be numbered among 'the shipping, trading, and financial entrepôts that dominated and ushered into existence [the] long contemporaneity' of capitalist modernity, is largely a consequence of its involvement in the transatlantic slave trade.[1] The trade in slaves, as well as the industries on which it depended (shipbuilding and insurance, for example) and for which it, in turn, provided vital material support (commercial sugar production), generated enormous concentrations of capital in metropolitan port cities like Liverpool that continued to finance British ventures both at home and overseas long after the trade itself was abolished.[2] Not only commodities and capital passed through the port of Liverpool: in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the activities of Liverpool-based shipping companies like Ocean Steam Ship introduced local men and women to migrants originating from all over the globe, contributing to the establishment of multiracial and cosmopolitan dockside communities. These became the objects of considerable surveillance and regulation, to the extent that they were felt to threaten 'a particular vision and practice of domestic and imperial order'.[3]

Of what relevance are such histories – which implicate Liverpudlians in the violent processes by which power, capital and value have been distributed globally, usually along racially differentiated (and differentiating) lines – to present-day efforts to imagine a more robust future for Liverpool and other metropolitan port cities hit hard by deindustrialisation? Urban regeneration projects have often been inspired, as Michael Parkinson observes, by fears of urban disorder.[4] In 1981, for instance, riots rocked neighbourhoods with high levels of unemployment and racial diversity in several of Britain's largest cities, seeming to underscore the necessity for the docklands development projects announced that same year in London and Liverpool. Advocates of such plans have tended to identify the inhabitants of neighbourhoods like Toxteth or Brixton, rather than the 'entrenched patterns of racial [and economic] discrimination and disadvantage' that have disenfranchised them, as the problem to be fixed.[5] It is important to contest this dehistoricising move, not just in the interest of a more accurate analysis, but because, as the debate over Education Secretary Michael Gove's plans to overhaul the national history curriculum reminds us, the past is among the most critical of the terrains on and over which the struggle to define belonging plays out. At the same time, the past functions as a locus of trouble for and in the present. What Stuart Hall terms 'the givenness of the historical terrain' – that is, the 'tendential historical relations' that 'establish and define the fields along which ideological struggle is *likely* to move' – must be attended to if we are to understand how to move it otherwise.[6] But in the past are also secreted alternatives that we might permit to haunt us as we pursue more just forms of sociality in the present.

Consider, for example, the increasing electoral purchase of the British far right. The white supremacist British National Party (BNP), which opposes both immigration and British participation in the European Union, first tasted electoral success in the Millwall by-election of 1993, when voters selected Derek Beackon to sit on Tower Hamlets Council. The Isle of Dogs, where Millwall is located, once housed the West India Docks, a now defunct system of docks possessing tremendous historical significance. Following the closure of the docks to commercial traffic in 1980, the Isle of Dogs was redeveloped by the London Docklands Development Corporation, which approved the construction of Canary Wharf, a complex of office and residential buildings, home to many of the world's most prominent financial and media corporations, on the old West India Docks site. The reasons for the BNP's success in Millwall – which has not, it should be noted, been repeated – are complex.[7] Still, that such a former crossroads of empire as the Isle of Dogs should have proved so hospitable to the xenophobic blandishments of the BNP matters, I think, insofar as it points to the way in which docklands continue to function as the loci of struggle over how the goods of citizenship, including the good that is citizenship, should be distributed.

In a blog post that draws heavily on the work of Stuart Hall and his colleagues presented in *Policing the Crisis* to contextualize the 2011 London riots, Ashley Dawson notes Britons' repeated use of the racialised figure of the immigrant to explain (away) that 'felt sense of crisis' through which postwar shifts

in the economic, ideological, socio-cultural and political landscape of Britain have tended to make themselves known.[8] Dawson focuses on the efforts of political actors like the BNP to pin 'the cause of the organic crisis on the figure of [the] Black immigrant.'[9] In contrast, I want to emphasise the work involved in producing blackness as the property of the immigrant (rather than of the citizen). Until 1962, persons born or naturalised in any of a certain class of British territories, including Britain itself, shared the common status of British subject; all such persons could settle in Britain without having to pass through immigration control. In 1962, however, Parliament, wishing to prevent (non-white) overseas British subjects from migrating to Britain, passed the first in a series of acts that transformed Britishness from an identity to which all imperial subjects had – in theory – access, to one reserved for those British subjects with genealogical ties to the British Isles. In Britain, then, the racialisation of the immigrant body has required that Britain's history as an empire be forgotten. That is, the extent to which, as the rise and fall of the Isle of Dogs' dock-centred economy indicates, the social goods of Britishness are a product of the labour and other resources of people who are, or can be made out to be, external to the familial community of Britishness.

The legislative record is littered with similar attempts to foreclose on the claims of a variety of marked subjects, including working-class men, women, slaves and colonised peoples, to the competencies and rights that are thereby rendered the property of (middle-class) men or metropolitan Britons alone. Catherine Hall reads the 1867 Reform Act, which extended the franchise to non-propertied (white) men, in relation to the refusal to do the same for women, as well as to the 1866 decision to reinstate direct British rule in post-slavery Jamaica: with property 'no longer the basis for the suffrage', 'race, gender, labour, and level of civilization now determined who was included in and excluded from the political nation'.[10] Twenty-first century debates about the parameters and entitlements of British belonging are the legacy of 'prior such moments'.[11] But foreclosure entails a movement of encryption as well as of expulsion: what is foreclosed upon achieves a kind of substance through being denied. Recalling the history that first granted and then denied millions of non-Britain-born British subjects the right to lay claim to the property of Britain and Britishness lends force to the demand that non-white Britons should be fully incorporated into the community of the nation. At the same time, it hints at the limits of the project of inclusion: what does it mean that non-white Britons have had to petition for entry to a community to which they were encouraged to believe they already belonged? If, as Catherine Hall's discussion of the 1865–67 movement for parliamentary reform suggests, projects of inclusion turn on procedures of differentiation, then, as I have argued elsewhere, we would do well to revisit the assumptions about belonging and social justice that, in liberal democratic states, shape decisions about how social goods, including the franchise, should be distributed.[12]

Writing about Hamilton, the Canadian port city that I call home, Phanuel Antwi and Amber Dean note how much the logics that enable us to imagine deindustrialising cities like Hamilton as 'problems' in dire need of the 'fix' of development resemble colonial ones.[13] As Dean writes elsewhere, however, such echoes should also alert us to a 'haunting': 'the resurfacing of this mythology in contemporary efforts to revitalize [urban centres] is an indication that these efforts are haunted by [their] colonial past, a past with claims on the present that are yet to be reckoned with.'[14] In his essay 'Broken Pine', another of my colleagues, Daniel Coleman, narrates the entwined histories of economic, environmental and colonial despoliation in the region that is the site of the present-day Hamilton.[15] Regeneration, he implies, must involve decolonisation, the future sought in an opening to the disturbance of a past that, insofar as settler colonialism endures in Canada, is not really past at all. The far right is not everywhere ascendant in Britain. Still, recognition of the extent to which, as Salman Rushdie puts it, their history happened overseas, continues to elude many Britons.[16] How might the imperative to decolonise reorient efforts to reimagine, make over, those former crossroads of empire, the docklands of Liverpool?

1 Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History,* Duke

University Press, Durham, 2005, p.8.

2 Thus, for example, as Amitav Ghosh's extraordinary recent novel *Sea of Poppies* (Picador, New York, 2008) makes clear, the nineteenth-century trade in opium cannot be understood without reference to the eighteenth-century trade in slaves: in this, the first in a trilogy of novels about the First Opium War, a diverse cast of characters converges aboard a former slaveship, the *Ibis*, which the son of a Liverpool timber merchant has converted for the purpose of circulating opium around the Indo-Pacific. *Legacies of British Slave-ownership* (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs), a website run by a team of University College London historians including Catherine Hall, Nick Draper and Keith McClelland, documents the multiple dimensions of slavery's afterlife in Britain.

3 Laura Tabili, 'Women "of a very low type": Crossing Racial Boundaries in Imperial Britain', *Gender and Class in Modern Europe*, ed. Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose, Cornell UP, Ithaca, 1996, p.188.

4 Michael Parkinson, 'Urban Regeneration and Development Corporations: Liverpool Style', *Local Economy,* Vol. 3, No. 2, 1988, p.109.

5 Gideon Ben-Tovim, 'Race, Politics, and Urban Regeneration: Lessons from Liverpool', in *Regenerating the Cities: The UK Crisis and the US Experience*, ed. Michael Parkinson, Bernard J. Foley and Denis R. Judd, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1988, p.142.

6 Stuart Hall, 'The Problem of Ideology: Marxism Without Guarantees', *Journal of Communication Inquiry,* Issue 10, No. 2, June, 1986, p.41.

7 See Daniel Trilling's *Bloody Nasty People: The Rise of Britain's Far Right*, Verso, London, 2012, for more about the BNP's victory in Millwall.

8 Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John N. Clarke and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, Holmes & Meier, New York, 1978, p.301.

9 Ashley Dawson, 'Policing the Crisis: Situating the 2011 London Riots in Historical Perspective', *Uneven Developments*, 10 August 2011, http://ashleydawson.info, accessed 10 June 2013.

10 Catherine Hall, 'Rethinking Imperial Histories: The Reform Act of 1867', *New Left Review,* Issue 208, November–December, 1994, p.29. Given the 'Creative Class' boosterism of influential twenty-first-century urban theorists like Richard Florida (see his *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Basic, New York, 2002), it is worth noting that Matthew Arnold penned *Culture and Anarchy*, his paean to 'culture' as a prophylactic 'against whatever brings risk of tumult and disorder, [namely] multitudinous processions in the streets of our crowded towns', in response to the mid-nineteent--century movement for parliamentary reform (Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy *and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p.100).

11 Baucom, op. cit., p.20.

12 See the fifth chapter of my *Better Britons: Reproduction, National Identity, and the Afterlife of Empire*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2013.

13 Phanuel Antwi and Amber Dean, 'Unfixing Imaginings of the City: Art, Gentrification, and Cultures of Surveillance', Affinities, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2010, http://affinitiesjournal.org/index.php/affinities/article/view/61/184, accessed 10 June 2013.

14 Amber Dean, 'Space, Temporality, History: Encountering Hauntings in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside', *The West and Beyond: New Perspectives on an Imagined Region*, ed. Alvin Finkel, Sarah Carter and Peter Fortna, Athabasca University Press, Edmonton, 2010, p.118.

15 Daniel Coleman, 'Broken Pine', *Hamilton Arts & Letters,* Issue 3, Vol.4, No.1, Spring, 2010, http://samizdatpress.typepad.com/hal_issue_three1_spring_2/broken-pine.html, accessed 10 June 2013.

16 Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, Viking, London, 1988, p.343.

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Nadine Attewell

As Assistant Professor of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University, Nadine Attewell works in and across modernist literary and cultural studies; postcolonial, indigenous and settler studies; and gender and sexuality studies. She is the author of Better Britons: Reproduction, National Identity, and the

Afterlife of Empire and is currently researching the experiences and identity projects of mixed-heritage people of Chinese descent in late imperial contexts, focusing on the port cities Hong Kong, Liverpool and London.